
The Psychology of the Latin American

Author(s): William R. Shepherd

Source: *The Journal of Race Development*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Jan., 1919), pp. 268-282

Published by:

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29738297>

Accessed: 01-08-2014 01:41 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



<http://www.jstor.org>

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE LATIN AMERICAN

By William R. Shepherd, Professor of History, Columbia University; Honorary Professor, University of Chile

“What has the United States in common with the countries of Latin America? Very little: the incidental fact of its geographical location in the same hemisphere, and the external circumstance that it became independent at almost the same time. . . . What, then, does it offer by way of unlikeness? Nearly everything, and in terms so disparate that they are but little less than diametrically the opposite of one another. Details and secondary matters apart, the contrasts, in which those countries never hold the place of vantage, are the following: populousness and uninhabitedness; wealth and misery; deeds and words; activity and atrophy; education and inculture; industry and politicalism; commerce and militarism; order and impulsiveness; legality and defiance of law; free will and arbitrariness; morality and egotism; truth and falsehood; principles and men; railways and mules; civilization and stagnation and even barbarism; liberty and slavery,” etc.

These are the words of an Argentine sociologist in a recent work¹ that elaborates on the theme until it covers upwards of 650 pages. So utterly dissimilar are the United States and its southern neighbors that, in his judgment, until education in the Anglo-Saxon sense has been made to permeate the Latin-American republics, “Pan-Americanism” will remain merely an expression, a concept void of real significance.²

An excursion into the realm of the cardinal points of difference between this country and its fellow nations in the

¹ Alfredo Colmo, *Los países de la América latina*, 8-9. Madrid, 1915.

² *Ibid.*, 651.

New World, which serve to render "Pan-Americanism" in fact and in practice as illusory as it is pleasing in theory and sentiment, might reveal many a sober verity to those who dream and talk and write about this particular sort of international solidarity—unless, of course, they believe that the principle that unlikes attract will prove omnipotent for overcoming divergence. Numerous are the angles of vision from which the points might be examined; but if any one of them can be singled out to special advantage, it would be the psychology of the Latin American, his way of looking at things, as contrasted with our own.

Although the topic affords a ready temptation to explain why the Latin American views matters so dissimilarly from ourselves, and how the divergence may be adjusted sufficiently to assure the virtual approximation of ideas, sympathies and interests requisite for international understanding and coöperation, it will be employed here with the sole object of setting forth what are possibly the most conspicuous of his traits that do not square with ours. Remembering that the allusion throughout is to the general and not to the exceptional, to the characteristic and not to the individual, one may discuss the situation frankly and without the remotest intention of assuming either a captious or a pharisaical attitude toward conditions with which we—as a people—are unfamiliar in our ordinary dealings. On the contrary, a spirit of genuine friendliness would suggest that the differences be indicated, in order that, once known and appreciated by us, they may be borne in mind when working upon some plan for an effective realization of what "Pan-Americanism" is presumed to represent. Even if criticism or condemnation seems implicit in treating the subject, an expression of either of them belongs properly to Latin-American writers,³ who have surveyed the conditions prevalent in their countries, and would come with poor grace

³ E.g., in addition to Colmo: J. Abasolo N., *La personalidad política y la América del porvenir*; A. Arguëdas, *Pueblo enfermo—Contribución a la psicología de los pueblos hispano-americanos*; M. Bomfim, *A. América latina*; C. O. Bunge, *Nuestra América*; F. García Calderón, *La creación de un continente* and *Latin America, its rise and progress*; S. Mendieta, *La enfermedad*

from a foreigner. Their opinions, indeed, are the chief source of the statements that follow. In the light of his personal relations with our southern neighbors and acquaintance with them in their home-lands, the present writer is loth to admit the absolute truth of the characterization. Allowance must be made for the evidence it contains of certain of the very qualities to be mentioned; and yet, Latin Americans, assuredly, know one another better than an outsider can.

The main respects, perhaps, in which the psychology of the Latin American differs from our own may be summed up in the words "egoism," "impulsiveness" and "unmorality." None of these is to be taken in the sense in which we would ordinarily understand it. Defined in its relation to the Latin American, "egoism" is a disposition to regard the individual for what he is, rather than for what he can do. It is individualism conscious of self, but devoid of genuine initiative. "Impulsiveness," similarly, includes the usual concept of acting without forethought and contains another ingredient as well. This is a tendency to perform such action with a view to producing immediate effects or impressions, rather than to accomplish ultimate results. It is a blend of opportunism and arrested determination. "Unmorality," in its turn, finds inadequate representation in the dictionary rendering of "non-morality." The Latin American is not altogether an amoral person. His is a state of mind, simply, which recognizes ethical obligations in theory, but is apt to abstain from applying them.

The egoism of the Latin American commonly appears in a threefold cult: of the person, of formality and of exclusiveness. He is wont to attribute to himself an innate superiority, of which pride, vanity and arrogance are not the only, if indeed the principal, manifestations. It is the person that figures, that counts for most, the contemplation of

de Centro-América; F. Ortiz, *La reconquista de América*; A. Rodríguez del Busto, *Peligros americanos*; S. Romero, *A América latina*; M. Ugarte, *El porvenir de la América latina*; C. Zumeta, *El continente enfermo*; also articles in *Cuba Contemporanea*; *La Reforma Social*; *Revista de Filosofía*; *Revista de Derecho, Historia y Letras*, etc.

self and the centering of all things in it. Personal honor the Latin American transmutes into a personalism of law, which makes courage for its own sake a virtue to be cultivated, regardless of conventional restraints. A martial sentiment, if not altogether an attitude of bellicosity, scornful of mere legal enactments or constitutional provisions, is the natural outcome.

Another phase of the egoism in question appears in an ultra-acute sense of personal dignity, which demands due recognition without allowance for circumstances. The story told of the Latin-American station-master is aptly illustrative. It seems that he had been telegraphed that two trains were coming in opposite directions on the same track, and had been ordered to throw the switch in time. The switch was not thrown and a frightful collision resulted. When asked why he had been so negligent, he answered: "The switchman was sick abed, and no one else was around." "Why didn't you throw the switch yourself?" "I told somebody to tell the switchman about it, and he didn't do it." "But when you knew that the switchman was ill, and you had no one else, why didn't you do it yourself, with your own hands?" "I!" was the astonished response, "I am the station-master! How should I be expected to do it? Everybody has got his dignity!"⁴ The more the story is thought over, the clearer will become its exemplification, not only of several of the characteristics already described, but of some of those bound up in the impulsiveness and unmorality of the Latin American, to be observed later.

As in olden days in Spain and Portugal, one strove to be an "hidalgo" or "fidalgo" (literally, a "son of something"), so the Latin American wants to be the head of something, or at least to make sure that his name shall be mentioned prominently in connection with a given undertaking. This striving for place and position is shown in his eagerness for office-holding, which amounts to a sort of mania or malady—"office-holderitis," so to speak. In consequence, he has not learned three maxims. These are: how to be a good loser

⁴ Bunge, *Nuestra América*, 220-221.

at elections; how to be happy without a public office, and how not to regard a public office as a private sinecure. If, therefore, he does enter into any arrangement with his fellows for common action, it is with the object primarily of enhancing his personal influence and prestige. This is the well-spring of the system of partisan leaders in politics and the blind adherence of their followers who call themselves after his name. Here, however, it is the egoism of the mass, ready to die for a man without thinking about the principles he is supposed to represent. Should conflict break out, the followers will wound, kill and destroy without any clear idea of the causes of the antagonism between the parties concerned.

Egoism displays itself, furthermore, in an excessive formality, in the rigor with which prescribed rules of conduct, official and social, must be observed. Artificiality is its keynote. From it proceed, not only pronounced decorum and etiquette, but a certain fixity of convention, a stiffness of propriety, a punctilious ceremoniousness, that seem incongruous in republican countries whence monarchs and courts, nobility and aristocracy, were banished a hundred years ago. The retention, also, of highly laudatory titles for officials and institutions, of tinsel uniforms for diplomats, of elaborate equipages and military escorts for presidents, and even the silken sash emblazoned with the particular country's colors and coat-of-arms which forms part of the presidential garb, on state occasions, appear inconsistent with democratic simplicity. Almost as inconsistent, also, seems the custom of wearing evening dress in the daytime for attendance on official functions.

Apart from the sartorial features of the matter, formality pervades many a procedure of government. It stiffens administrative, legislative and judicial activities, and ties them hard and fast with the tape that is red. The written document, along with the confirmatory signatures and paraphs attached thereto, constitutes its book of rules, and bureaucracy is the agent that enforces them. True to its concepts and traditions, officialdom exacts endless preliminary requirements, demands proofs and witnesses and other forms

of testimony galore, delays, postpones, tergiversates and—eventually—does something that common sense would have settled in a few minutes.

Within the social world meticulous correctness is that which gives tone, insures propriety and forbids deviation. The “*día de moda*,” or “fashionable day” is a sort of calendar-code. According to its prescriptions of date, places of amusement are to be visited or other social functions performed. Not to heed the calendar, and thus to do all this on the wrong day, is altogether unbecoming. Nor would an account of who were there, or what had occurred on such occasions, be either complete, befitting or credible, unless photographs thereof were taken and descriptions made of the clothing worn, for subsequent publication.

So buckram-like is this conventionalism of social conduct, that it renders adaptability to any special condition that may arise virtually impossible. It would be an exaggeration, doubtless, to assert, that, whereas the American knows how to be serious and dignified at the right time, the Latin American apparently is prone to select the wrong time. An example of this misplacement, at all events, is the way in which he views the association of older people and children, notably in public. Instead of entering with zest and real enjoyment into the sports and games of the young folk, he stands aloof. To participate would not comport with his estimate of the proper relationship that other people ought to see existing between youth and its elders. An American at a picnic would have a good time; a Latin American would be bored. Even at a banquet, or other more or less festive meal, when the moment for speech-making comes, the joviality that preceded must yield to an appropriate seriousness; for the flow of oratory to follow brooks no joking. A foreigner may tell amusing stories that will be endured and rewarded with laughter—more, perhaps, than they merit—but the Latin American perforce must color his remarks with eloquence alone.

Yet another aspect of egoism calls for mention. This is the spirit of exclusiveness that makes real coöperation extremely difficult, if not impossible. Resident foreigners

will form associations for gymnastics, sport, education or some kind of mutual aid. The Latin American flocks by himself. He has clubs, of course, and goes frequently to them; but it is not companionship that he seeks there, so much as it is the satisfaction of his craving for the self-excitement that will come from gambling. Conversation, reading, a bit of athletic exercise, participation in a game of skill rather than of chance, offers scant attraction to him, even if the requisite persons or apparatus happen to be available.

Rendered intensely partisan by his personal centripetence, and correspondingly jealous and distrustful of potential rivals, the Latin American balks at the thought of coöperation. On the other hand, such a thing as good-natured competition for the attainment of a common welfare is equally alien to his mentality. Association with others, he fears, might afford some advantage to a rival; and a contest with them, carried on in the best of humor and with the utmost friendliness, for the accomplishment of an object not directly beneficial to himself, would shock his sense of the eternal fitness of matters personal.

Rather than join his fellows in any project of mutual action, he prefers to belittle what they do. Criticism that always destroys and never constructs is his forte. What other folk say or write or do, he must attenuate: otherwise he might seem to be giving aid, thus elevating them and depressing him. Instead of encouraging their aspirations, he must oppose and nullify them. On the theory, perhaps, that association produces harmony, and hence a chance for all to rise—whereas apartness brings discord, and hence a chance for all to fall, except himself—he elects the latter course. It may fill him with a sense of vindictive pleasure if they go down, but not of forgiving happiness if they go up. So rooted is this inclination to belittle, that it creates a paradox. Let a Latin American visit New York, and he will be hypercritical of everything American. Once he returns to his own country, he disparages it just as heartily in comparison with all things American!

Fair play, therefore, respect for the opinions of others, the tolerance that means willingness to allow for a divergence in details that makes for unity in essentials, the Latin American is indisposed to admit or practice. Altruism, being the opposite of egoism, has no place in the sun of his approval. Regard for the rights of others might signify disregard for his own.

The net result of all this is that the Latin American suffers from a lack of real social solidarity. His "pronunciamentos," or appeals to self-interest over against organized society at large, and the absence of cohesiveness in his political parties, show it. The fact that he has no appreciation at home of the kind of private philanthropy that endows scientific, educational or humanitarian establishments or enterprises, makes it quite as plain. These are so many undertakings for the general good during this life, and convey no advantage to a particular individual. Hence, if the Latin American has any money to bequeath to an institution or society, he provides for himself again—eschatologically at least—by leaving it to the church. Patriotic in a sense he is, and yet he is not possessed of a genuine civic consciousness, of that sort of singlehearted devotion to country and community which subordinates the advancement of self to the welfare of the people as a body and of the nation as a whole.

Among the characteristics of the psychology of the Latin American which spring from impulse, one is hypersensitiveness. Quick in passions and bitter in enmity, he is easily offended or insulted. He is disposed to make a fetich of the melodramatic features of life, and to cherish prepossessions of medieval notions of heroism. Though his vivacity of temperament may incline him to look lightly upon serious things, he lacks a sense of irony. Excitable, irritable, he does not possess that saving grace of humor which smoothes a situation over. Satire, when he employs it, is apt to assume an aggressively personal form. Rather than seek out the causes of misunderstanding and remove them by a "heart-to-heart talk," by explanation, compromise or apology, he resorts to the "weapons of a gentleman"—to duel-

ling. Single combat alone will furnish the requisite atonement or reparation for an injury, real or fancied. To forget and forgive might be construed as cowardice.

These traits the Latin American carries over into the arena of political discussion. In public gatherings he is wont to ventilate pet theories and expatiate upon personal grievances until temperaments naturally mercurial overflow, and national susceptibilities have been ruffled sufficiently to emit sparks of fury. Unacquainted with the precise standing of his country in the world at large, and imperfectly informed about its actual relation to its immediate neighbors, or unwilling to recognize either of these circumstances, he converts patriotism only too readily into jingoism—"patriotismo" into "patriotería." Restless, nervous, suspicious, morbidly sensitive, untrained in habits of forbearance and self-restraint, he does not wish to hear the truth, however kindly, honestly and tactfully conveyed. Much less is he disposed to appreciate or profit by it. To him it is nothing other than outrageously malevolent criticism, which conceals either a sinister design to inflict material injury, or else a deliberate intention to insult.

Such a state of mind would seem to render an absolutely free and frank discussion of international affairs, as related to Latin America, and particularly as they may happen to bear upon the attitude of one country toward another, practically impossible, and a really fair solution of a specific problem, out of the question. Should anyone who, like the popular definition of a professor as "a person who thinks otherwise," venture to dissent or put forth a wholly innocent remark, he is apt to be misquoted, misinterpreted and morally lynched on the spot. Then come highly metaphorical and pyrotechnical harangues, perfervid displays of ardor, shouting of "vivas" ("hurrahs for") and "mueras" ("down withs"), occasionally followed by the finishing touch of a direct insult to the flag or coat-of-arms of the foreign nation whose alleged misbehavior is under consideration—all this in time of actual peace. The result may be the precipitation of an armed conflict without anything like an adequate reason for it.

Even in the literary feature of political polemics the Latin American is prone to regard the productions of partisan pens—provided, of course, that they favor his side—as altogether infallible, and resents intimations to the contrary. Somewhat inconsistent, perhaps, with his disposition to belittle the achievements of others, he holds that the assertions such works contain are utterly beyond the shafts of criticism. To him they are “indiscutable,” a species of law and gospel unsusceptible of contradiction either by an adversary at home or by a dissenter abroad.

Another phase of the Latin American’s impulsiveness is presented by his verbosity. At home, on the street, in business and in the halls of congress, talkativeness reigns wellnigh supreme. Speech-making on every occasion and on slight provocation is the order of the day. If the speech can be, as it usually is, read, so much the better, because its length is thereby assured, and not only its length, but its potentiality for digression. The latter displays itself, either in an anxiety lest everything be not included, or in the faculty that Latin Americans call so expressively “*mariposear*,” i.e., to flit about like a butterfly from topic to topic, without ever settling long upon, or sinking deeply into, any particular theme. This mode of treatment may apply to the entire subject or to its component parts. If he happens to know the subject too well, rather than well enough, the speaker will bring out so insistently one detail after another that he fails to see the woods for the trees. In either case, extensiveness, and not intensiveness, is the object sought. The net result, however, would seem to reveal an abundance of words in the place of ideas, and an inclination to mistake talking a great deal for talking well and to the point. It is not an illustration of the art of concealing one’s thoughts by conversation so much, as of drowning reason in billows of emotion and imagination.

Eloquent the Latin American is, but his eloquence often takes the form of an efflorescent rhetoric, of a lavishness of flowery verbiage which is likely to mark an absence of originality. Both his oratory and his literature appear to lack genuine spontaneity, naturalness, simplicity, directness.

They reflect more sentimentality than sentiment. Thought is hidden, or the poverty of it excused, amid linguistic extravagance and exaggeration, and real creativeness is missing.

Closely akin to these aspects of the matter is the aptitude of the Latin American for verbal manipulation. Whether he makes speeches or writes books, he delights in versatility of expression. So as to insure that what he has to say shall be thoroughly representative of what other distinguished people have written and said, he ransacks dictionaries, lexicons, grammars and collections of synonyms for all sorts of choice or exotic words, phrases, archaisms and neologisms. If he cannot find just what he wants to reproduce, he will improvise it. To the same end, he will quote also from languages and authors, dead and living, anything imposing in the shape of classical terms, aphorisms, conventional utterances and the like; and, if desirable, will eke them out by reciting a list of more or less eminent names, drawn from as wide a geographical and chronological area as possible. The greater the range of the selection and the more redundant the expression, the more cogent, presumably, the effect produced, regardless of the pedantry that so much of it implies.

If inclined to juggle with words and phrases, the Latin American is no less disposed to indulge in agile theorizing, rather than quick thinking. He jumps easily to conclusions and proffers hasty generalizations. When troubles arise he has a ready-made panacea for them, and wants to administer it at once. He knows that something ought to be done, and believes that he knows how it ought to be done, even if he does not know how to do it. The improvidence, moreover, which he shows in his disinclination to save money or time, is matched by the lack of foresight and precision which leads him to talk about the ends without discussing the means. Hence, while the talk goes on, the particular thing that calls for action may languish, or else be done in such a hurry that it must speedily be undone and started all over again. Not infrequently it dies while the doctors are still prescribing.

Instead of slowly, patiently, industriously, systematically, examining in advance the practicability of a given measure, and studying its probable results, the Latin American wants to have his own particular nostrum tried out on the spot. Failing this, he will urge that what he has read in books on the subject, or has heard that other countries have done, be adopted forthwith. Whether the lore of the printed word or the local experience of another people is really adaptable to the environment of his own land, has little significance for him. If anything has succeeded elsewhere, it must succeed in his country too.

The Latin American, therefore, craves innovation, and is prone to confound experiment with achievement. Not the durability that affords a chance for something to mature and become really systematic, but the changeability that insures a plenitude of projects and a poverty of accomplished facts, seems to be his goal. If, under such circumstances, his constitutions are apt to be so much paper, instead of the fundamentals of government in application, his institutions are quite as likely to be so many scaffoldings, within which no solid edifice has been reared.

On a par with all this is the quixotism of the Latin American—the absence of that sober second-thought which restrains one from “flying off the handle.” To attempt the impossible, to ignore the disproportion between what one pretends to do and what one can do, seems alluring to him. It is not the realization of a practical, though extremely difficult, enterprise at which he aims, but an attainment of the impracticable and visionary.

Since impulsiveness drives one forward too suddenly, the effort it entails is as quickly exhausted, and indifference, if not positive inertia, is likely to ensue. The eager enthusiasm with which the Latin American starts off on something wears off all too soon. He will form societies, associations, leagues, institutes and what not, and formulate the needful resolutions; but once the names and portraits of the organizers have been published, and the indispensable, though laborious and obscure, committee work starts, the “big men” lose interest and the small men likewise until the whole

affair drops into the limbo of the forgotten. Indisposed, it would seem, to long, hard, regular and continuous toil, the Latin American then falls back upon the government to do what ought to have been done by private initiative.

A moral consciousness, finally, a feeling of personal responsibility, a clear-cut sense of distinction in practice between the right and the wrong of things, rather than between the correct and incorrect, a vigorously concrete appreciation of the qualities most essential to the daily task of social and individual improvement, seem lacking somehow in the Latin American. Tenacity of purpose, an indomitable will-power, directness, incisiveness and precision in statement and accomplishment, and the force of character which finds its great expression in conscientiousness, appear either insufficiently developed or almost non-existent, on the ethical side of his psychology. The moral sense as such is apt to assume an artistic or aesthetic form. The Latin American will look preferentially for the easiest and prettiest road to a given end, and not so much for the most effective one.

There is something about his psychology, moreover, which savors of a cult of externals. One form of it is an outward regard for what one inwardly must disbelieve. It appears in the guise of the fulsome compliment, in the assurance that if one admires anything, it is "at his disposal," and in the dilatoriness of "mañana"—the inclination to postpone the performance of anything, either for no particular reason, or because a promise already made to do something at a certain time involves a sort of courteous obligation periodically to defer its fulfilment by a resort to excuses. In the same category belong the fondness for display, the excessive lavishness in expenditure which is its accompaniment, and the passion for diversion and entertainment which gives point to the saying that a "Latin American dearly loves a 'fiesta.'"

Another form of this cult of externals is the discrepancy that seems to exist between what has been assimilated by imitation and the spirit that ought to animate it. Humanity the world over, of course, is prone to show the best and hide the worst: the Latin American, however, to exhibit,

not the eminently characteristic, but the evidence of patterning after other people. For this reason the foreign visitor will have pointed out to him those phases of orderly civilized life which elsewhere are taken for granted, and not what he would like to observe, namely, the things that are really distinctive.

More serious manifestations of the unmorality under consideration reveal themselves in the disposition of the Latin American to condone misbehavior. Too frequently will he look upon an individual who has done something wrong as a "desgraciado," a poor fellow, simply, who has committed an offence and who, because of his bad luck in being found out, deserves a measure of commiseration. The Latin American, furthermore, will lament eloquently a given evil after it has been discovered, but fail to take the practical steps necessary to abolish it. Instead, he prefers to "investigate." If he holds a position and learns of the perpetration of some act hurtful to the welfare of the establishment, he is apt to keep silent about it, and if one of his associates, more courageous than himself, exposes the wrongdoing, he will decline to lend him support. Self-respect, thus, would appear to be, not a matter of moral interest, on behalf either of the community or of one's own inner consciousness of rectitude, but rather something related to personal dignity. An example of the same attitude is visible along official lines, in the disinclination adequately to protect foreign patents, trademarks and copyright, the apparent excuse being that, since the foreigners concerned belong to countries more advanced, they ought to be willing to allow their less fortunate fellows in other lands to benefit by their knowledge and experience. Under such circumstances reproduction might well be considered a suitable form of appreciation, and this, together with the consciousness of virtue as its own reward, an ample compensation.

All the foregoing is designed to present certain cardinal points of difference between the psychology of the Latin American and our own. For their statement no claim of exhaustiveness or infallibility is advanced—nothing more in fact than an honest effort to indicate them as objectively and

dispassionately as the personal sentiment of the writer predisposes and the nature of the sources will allow. Error and injustice are bound to lurk in generalization, and the likelihood of their appearance here must be freely admitted. Whether the several traits constitute actual faults, whether the Latin American has an abundance of virtues to offset them, whether we ourselves have as many, or more, defects of another order, are matters quite irrelevant to the purpose in mind. It is not a question of superiority or inferiority on his part or on ours, but merely one of difference. If, therefore, a friendly and tolerant spirit is evinced by both the Latin Americans and ourselves toward the aspects of our mutual divergence, and if both of us refrain from wounding the sensibilities which such divergence engenders, respecting them instead, the clearer will become the prospects for that genuine, hearty, wholesome understanding and coöperation among the nations of the New World, which will make "Pan-Americanism" a reality.